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A Tribute to Lee Sharkey

I spoke with Lee for the first time during my interview for an internship at the Beloit Poetry Journal. She was a familiar and central figure in the small, single-intersection town of Farmington, Maine, where I attended college. With an orb of silver hair, all-black clothes, a blurry band of flowers tattooed around her left wrist, she could easily be spotted. Before I knew her well, I recognized her as one of the demonstrators standing each Friday at noon in front of the post office with the Women in Black, a silent vigil protesting the US invasion of Iraq. Her reputation as a writer and activist, as the founder of the Women and Gender Studies program at the university, preceded her.

During the interview, we sat beside each other on a couch in her co-editor John Rosenwald’s living room, which served as the headquarters for the BPJ. I don’t recall what we spoke about that day or any of the questions she asked me. I do recall, however, how she spoke—slowly, carefully, sage-like, with prolonged pauses. She waited patiently for the right word to find her, sometimes using her hands to extract it, to pull its thread out of the ether between her thumb and forefinger.

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Each day of the internship began in ritual: Lee picked up the day’s submissions from the PO box downtown, cut through each envelope with a letter opener, paperclipped a quarter-sheet paper to each submission, and stacked them in front of me and Matthew Luzitano, the other intern, to read. And for the next several hours, always with the help of clementine oranges and shortbread, we passed submissions back and forth, read poems, and wrote our reactions on the quarter sheets. At the end of each day’s work, we would gather together on that couch to discuss what we had discovered. These conversations—about what role politics should play in poems, the muscularity of language, the authenticity of narrative, the moral obligations of a writer, how sounds contribute to meaning—were my education as a poet.

There was a purity about Lee. She tossed out cover letters and biographical statements unread. I watched her place the same level of attention into considering a handwritten submission from an inmate as she did with one from a prize-winning poet, always searching for, what she once described to me in a letter, that “great thumping visionary heart heat” of poetry. I remember watching her read submissions in the corner of the living room, holding out a poem in one hand, and with her free hand, conducting its particular music to herself.

Over the twelve years since that internship, Lee and I maintained our friendship over my visits home to Maine or at the annual AWP Conference, and through letters. “Where are you,” she’d write to me, “on and off the page?”
As a poet, Lee was fearless. Her poems, often presented without punctuation, are taut with the tension between reckless abandon and a surgical exactness. They are authentic yet lyrical, visceral yet visionary, both written in a vernacular yet oracular mode; they are alive and shimmering with that precision, that perfect word-searching I had witnessed her perform so often, that percussion that I had watched her conduct in the corner of the *BPJ* office those autumn afternoons. The poems Lee was most interested in—both in her own work and in the poems she accepted for the journal—engaged with the ethics of human dignity. She saw poetry as an extension of her activism, and her activism an extension of her poetry. Despite directing so much of her energy into others—into editing, demonstrations, her students—Lee’s work in its own right is a major force in contemporary poetry.

This idea struck me again, a couple of years ago during one of my annual visits to Maine, when I heard Lee read a few of her new poems at a house party celebrating the *BPJ*. I remember watching her hands move through the cadences and rhythms of her poems, swooping slowly and deliberately. I made a mental note to remember this, as the thought had occurred to me then that this might be the last time I would see Lee. Later, as I prepared to leave, pulling on my boots in the mudroom before driving back through the mid-March slush to my parents’ home, Lee came over to give me a farewell hug. She held my shoulders afterwards with both of her hands for a long time before kissing me goodbye. It was evident that this thought had crossed her mind, too.

*It is difficult for me to describe Lee and her contribution to American letters, the warmth she nurtured her students with, her dedication to peace both globally and in her communities, without speaking in grandiose terms. She bent one of the nation’s leading poetry journals towards social justice, championed the unpublished, and launched the early careers of so many poets. In her life and in her practice, Lee paid close attention to etymology and the history lurking in our speech. She knew that language, like any other natural force, can be warped towards cruelty and violence just as easily as towards transformation and peace. Words held power. Lee devoted her life to this conviction, and she plucked them out of the air.*